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Civil War Episodes

Chickamauga & Chattanooga

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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Lincoln Lore

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BRIG.-GEN. BEN HARDIN HELM MRS. LINCOLN'S "REBEL" BROTHER-IN-LAW (Continued from the January, 1972 issue)

Helm's Southern leanings were undoubtedly strengthened by Governor Beriah Magoffin's reply to Simon Cameron, Secretary of War, who asked Kentucky for four regiments of militia for immediate service. His dispatch dated April 15, 1861, stated, "I say, emphatically, Kentucky will furnish no troops for the wicked purpose of subduing her sister Southern States." Accordingly, he penned a letter to Lincoln declining the commission and his refusal was recorded by the War Department with the following entry:

"Helm, Ben Hardin, nominated for paymaster in the United States Army, April 27, 1861. Declined." Nevertheless, Helm remained grateful to Lincoln for his kind offer and, even after he had taken the field at the head of Confederate troops, he sent felicitous messages to the president in 1861 and 1862.

Having embraced the cause of the South "with all the enthusiasm of his extremely ardent and enthusiastic nature," Helm visited the Confederate capital at Montgomery, Alabama, to pay his respects to Jefferson Davis and to offer his services for military duty to help the Southern cause. The provisional president of the Confederacy informed Helm that the South already had more troops than they could adequately arm and equip. Davis suggested to Helm that he return to Kentucky and work from a political angle in an attempt to bring his native state into the Confederacy and help win independence for all the slave states.

Helm was a soldier and not a politician and his interest in military affairs caused him first to affiliate with the Kentucky State Militia in attempting to establish a condition of strict neutrality. In the spring of 1861, he took up his work as the Assistant Inspector General of the State Guard and on several occasions he was ordered to enforce upon the people of Kentucky the neutrality policy which soon was proven to be impracticable. Later he used his influence to recruit for the Confederacy the First Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry. His reputation in Kentucky was such that:

"One blast upon his bugle-horn was worth a thousand men."

The soldiers for the First Regiment of Cavalry were recruited from the different sections of the state and the leadership of Helm was of such a character as to attract a superior class of men to the colors, not usually found in other organizations of the same numerical strength. For this work Helm received from his government a colonel's commission in September, 1861, and he took command of the ten companies which constituted the

First Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry. These men were mustered into the Confederate army at Bowling Green, Kentucky, and their colonel instituted a training routine which soon transformed the raw recruits into an army of trained soldiers. Helm's training routine was "company drill in the forenoon, regimental drill in the afternoon, brigade drill on Friday, inspection on Saturday, saber exercise between times and guard and fatigue duty to occupy leisure hours." However, in spite of the arduous tasks, the personal influence of Colonel Helm was felt by every man in his command. He was kind and affable to his troops, but at the same time he maintained a military dignity that did not breed contempt. The men of the First Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry were all of the opinion that their leader was professionally skilled, which of course was a comfort to every soldier in his command.

While Helm's regiment was in training in Southern Kentucky, they engaged in outpost and scout duty, and this body of troops became a kind of corps of observation. Even when the Confederate

army abandoned Bowling Green, it was Colonel Helm's duty to cover the retreat. Arriving in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, February 23, 1862, he was placed under the orders of General John C. Breckinridge, where his regiment was temporarily brigaded with the Kentucky Infantry. Upon receiving an order to observe the movements of the Union forces on the Tennessee River, he took up his station at Burnsville, Mississippi, and guarded the approaches to the town of Corinth.

Knowing of his experience in scout duty and regarding him as a capable officer, General Albert Sidney Johnston sent Helm on a tour of observation of the territory between the Union position on the Tennessee and Nash-



A photograph of Mrs. Ben Hardin Helm made in 1864.

ville. Taking with him a select body of cavalymen, Colonel Helm set out for his duties around the latter part of March and during the first few days of April he reported to Johnston the rapid approach of the Union general, Don Carlos Buell, and he indicated that it was likely he would be able to join General U. S. Grant's forces on April 6th.

Johnston, basing his plans upon Colonel Helm's observations, planned to attack Grant on April 4th, before he could be reinforced by Buell, but he was prevented from doing this, because of the difficulty of transporting his artillery over the wet and soft country roads. The failure to attack Grant before he was reinforced by Buell resulted in a defeat for the Confederate forces and the death of the able Kentuckian, General Johnston. During the battle of Shiloh, Helm's command, the First Kentucky Cavalry, was required to hold its position on the Tennessee to guard the approaches to Johnston's left and rear and with such an assignment they found no opportunity for brilliant action. A detailed account of the activities of Colonel Helm at the time of the battle of Shiloh has never been revealed due to the secret nature of his work in scouting the enemy. Nevertheless, his efforts were observed by his superior officers and won for him the warm encomiums of those who understood the importance of his mission.

After Shiloh, Colonel Helm found himself in line for promotion and on April 17, 1862, General Pierre G. T. Beauregard announced he was to become a brigadier-general with the appointment predating March 14th. Brigadier General Helm was then ordered to report to General Breckinridge, which he was able to do on the 26th of April. He was then assigned to the command of the Third Brigade of Infantry of the Reserve Corps, which consisted of Arkansas, Mississippi and Missouri regiments. Helm was disappointed with his command, because he had under him no Kentucky troops. This condition, however, did not exist for any lengthy period of time, because, on July 8th, at Vicksburg, another change was made in the Reserve Corps, when the regiments under Brigadier General J. M. Hawes were designated as the Second Brigade and placed under the command of General Helm. The troops of this brigade consisted of men from Kentucky, Alabama and Mississippi.

Upon assuming command of the Second Brigade, General Helm appointed his staff and, among the half dozen competent officers whom he named, he picked Major Thomas H. Hayes, his brother-in-law and a resident of Hardin County, Kentucky, and Lieutenant Alexander H. Todd, of Lexington, another brother-in-law, to act in the capacity of assistant inspector general and aide-de-camp respectfully. These men were destined to see action within the month at the battle of Baton Rouge. It was the plan of General Breckinridge to capture that place, with the assistance of the immense iron-clad ram, the *Arkansas*, which was to cooperate with his land force. The city was occupied by a Union army under the command of General Thomas Williams, who was successful, although he lost his life, in driving Breckinridge back. Shortly before the attack on Baton Rouge on August 5th, Breckinridge's men were waiting for daylight in order to make a charge when an unfortunate accident occurred. Some mounted rangers were placed behind the artillery and infantry, but in the darkness they eased forward, because they were eager to get into the fray, and in riding to the front they encountered Union sentries. This caused an exchange of shots to be

fired. The Confederate rangers then galloped back to their own lines amidst a hail of fire, and this action provoked additional firing between the Confederate troops and their mounted horsemen.

The results were tragic and among other casualties Brigadier General Helm was dangerously injured by a fall from his horse, being knocked over and contused by the running cavalry. Lieutenant Todd, Mrs. Lincoln's half-brother, was killed from one of the aimless shots that was fired during the confusion. He was the second brother to lose his life, as Samuel Todd was killed while serving with a Louisiana regiment at Shiloh. The death of this young lieutenant, who as a child had played with Robert Lincoln, must have saddened the president's household.

General Helm's injury was of such a serious nature as to render him disabled for weeks, and Colonel Thomas H. Hunt, who had immediately assumed command of his brigade in the action before Baton Rouge, was given temporary command of the troops while his commander recovered. By September, General Helm was again able to report for duty and he was assigned the command of the post of Chattanooga. Later he was transferred to the command of the Eastern District, Department of the Gulf, with headquarters at Pollard, Alabama. This transfer was made after General Braxton Bragg's army had passed Chattanooga on his retreat from Kentucky. The reason for assigning General Helm to the Department of the Gulf was due to Confederate apprehension of an advance on the part of the Federals operating from Pensacola.

A few months later the Confederate government found a more important assignment for General Helm. By the direction of President Davis, he was ordered on January 31, 1863, to relinquish his command of the Eastern District, Department of the Gulf, and to report to General William Joseph Hardee for the command of the brigade of the late Brigadier General Roger W. Hanson who had been killed at the battle of Stone's River. Hardee ordered Helm to report to Breckinridge for the command of the First Kentucky Brigade, which consisted of the Second, Fourth, Sixth and Ninth Kentucky Regiments, Forty-first Alabama Regiment and Captain Robert L. Cobbs' (Kentucky) Battery. Helm was delighted with the assignment, because of the great number of Kentuckians found in his command. His men had unusual confidence in his leadership and the morale of the brigade was greatly enhanced. General Helm took up his assignment on Feb. 16, 1863, and he immediately selected his staff officers. Of the seven men who were chosen, two were from his home community



This cannon-ball pyramid marks the approximate spot on the Chickamauga battlefield where General Ben Hardin Helm fell mortally wounded on September 20, 1863.

of Hardin County and one of his aides-de-camp was Lieutenant William Wallace Herr, who married in January, 1866, Katherine Bodley ("Kitty") Todd, the sister of Mrs. Helm and a half-sister of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.

For several months the First Kentucky Brigade, which was a part of the division commanded by General Breckinridge, was more or less idle. While they were stationed in middle Tennessee at Wartrace, Manchester, Beech Grove and Hoover's Gap, General Helm drilled his men and became active in his duties as a commander. When Breckinridge was absent, it devolved upon him to command the division, which was good training for a brigadier. Due to the fact that time and again their divisional or brigade commander was absent, or transferred to other commands, or killed in battle, the expatriated Kentuckians often thought of their brigade as an orphan — hence the use of the name "Orphan Brigade" later became current.

While waiting for orders, the First Kentucky Brigade was challenged by the brigade of General Daniel Adams for competitive drill, and the bid was accepted by General Helm. The regiments now contended for the championship of the army and not simply for the division, because it was admitted that Adams' brigade was one of the best drilled in the Army of Tennessee and the Kentuckians claimed they could beat "the world on anything required of soldiers." The drills got under way and the competition was so keen that many high ranking officers of the Confederate army were present to witness the exhibitions. Even his excellency, Jefferson Davis, was apprised of the event and in a letter to the president dated April 15, 1863, Colonel William Preston Johnston stated that the Kentucky Brigade commanded by General Helm had in their performance indicated that they were "rapid, yet precise," that "in . . . appearance" they were "tough and active and they will compare for efficiency with any brigade in the Confederate army." Before the drills had ended, the division of Breckinridge was ordered on an expedition into Mississippi, but the general consensus of opinion was that the Kentuckians were the best trained.

Breckinridge's men did not relish the Mississippi expedition. They felt that expatriated Mississippians should be ordered to that theatre of war. The Kentuckians desired to stay somewhat near their own home state, and they left General Breckinridge know how they felt about the matter. He then took up the question with General Bragg, who left the decision up to Breckinridge. At this time a coolness existed between Bragg and Breckinridge, because of their disagreement over tactical questions during the battle of Stone's River or Murfreesboro. Breckinridge's men found how the matter stood and, when they realized that to go with Breckinridge would be to support him against Bragg, the entire division started on the Mississippi campaign. The object of the expedition was to reinforce General Joseph E. Johnston, who in turn was to relieve General John C. Pemberton, then under siege at Vicksburg. Helm's brigade spent the entire month of June, 1863, in the vicinity of Jackson, Mississippi, fortifying their position, picketing and following the general routine of camp life.

Day by day General Pemberton's position was growing more serious and, on July 1st, the troops of General Johnston were ordered forward to undertake the hazardous venture beyond the Big Black River for an attack upon the Federal land force around Vicksburg. The weather at this time was almost unbearable, the roads were dusty, and drinking water was scarce. Many men died from exhaustion and sunstroke. The fall of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, necessitated a retreat of Johnston's army, which had not had sufficient time to relieve Pemberton. Federal troops now harassed Johnston's army, and from July 10th, to the 17th, a series of skirmishes between the advance lines occurred at irregular intervals. On the 16th of July, Johnston ordered a retreat by a pontoon bridge over Pearl River to Morton.

Helm's Kentucky Brigade acted as a rear guard for the army, but they were not attacked, as the Federals did not follow. Establishing a camp on the 21st near Morton, afterward called "Camp Hurricane," the weary army settled down for a much needed rest. On July 22nd, General Helm wrote to his wife:

"As usual we are on a grand retreat, the sufferings



Mrs. Ben Hardin Helm, "Mother" of the Orphan Brigade. One of the most significant events in her life following the war was the re-interment of the remains of her husband on September 19, 1884, (at the re-union of the First Kentucky Brigade of Infantry) in the private Helm Cemetery at Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

of which, so far as I am personally concerned, are unparalleled in the war. We have to drink water that, in ordinary times, you wouldn't offer your horse; and I have hardly slept out of a swamp since we left Jackson. This is the sixth day, and we have not come much over forty miles. Our retreat is very slow and deliberate. The enemy have not annoyed us."

At Camp Hurricane, Helm's Brigade rested for about a month. Their stay there was quiet, with the least duties assigned to them in their entire military careers. This complacency, however, was broken on August 26th, when the division of General Breckinridge was ordered to travel by rail and steamer, by the way of Mobile, to Chattanooga (Tyner's Station), to reinforce Bragg. Helm's Brigade went into camp on September 2nd, and by the eighth day of that month the movements which were the preliminary steps leading to the great battle of Chickamauga were initiated. They marched and countermarched and, finally after complicated preliminary military maneuvers, the division of Breckinridge bivouacked on September 18th, near Chickamauga Creek.

Approaching Chickamauga Creek from Pigeon Mountain, Breckinridge's division took their place on the east side of that stream. Their position was near Glass's Mill and they constituted the extreme left of the infantry of the army. Breckinridge ordered the Second Kentucky across the ford near Glass's Mill in order to determine the strength of the Federal forces, and the Sixth Kentucky was placed in close supporting distance. Other forces were dispatched along the creek, and on the morning of the 19th the remainder of Helm's brigade, along with other regiments, was sent across Glass's Ford. The advance position of Helm's brigade drew fire from the Federals.

While this minor engagement was taking place, General Breckinridge received orders from Lieutenant General D. H. Hill to withdraw his position and to proceed to a point about three miles south of Lee and Gordon's Mill. This place was on the road leading from Chattanooga to Lafayette, and was an ideal situation for guarding the approach to that road from Glass's Mill and the ford above. A few casualties resulted from the directed change in the position, but the losses were slight. However, this point was not held for any length of time, as Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk was moving the divisions of his wing as so many men upon a chess board.

The last important movement of Breckinridge's division occurred during the night of September 19th, and the morning of the 20th, when he was ordered to lengthen the battle line upon the right of Major Patrick R. Cleburne which placed the Kentuckians on the extreme right of the infantry line of battle, General Helm's brigade constituted the extreme left of Breckinridge's line, General Stovall's was in the center, and General Adam's brigade was on the right. With orders to advance on the Federals, Cleburne's and Breckinridge's divisions, after some delays, moved forward about 9:30 A.M., and this phase of the battle of Chickamauga opened with great fury and Helm's brigade, which had lunged forward with terrific force, turned out to be in the center of the fiercest fighting.

About 10:00 A.M. while Breckinridge's division was moving forward against the Federals, it was noticed that for some reason a part of the left brigade under Helm had not advanced simultaneously with the rest of the division. Later it was determined that they were facing breastworks situated in angular positions, which subjected Helm's men not only to fire in front but to a fierce enfilading fire from the left. This portion of the line proved to be one of the most hotly contested positions of the entire battlefield. Here gallant Kentuckians by the hundreds "gave their lives in reckless fashion," as they pushed ahead under the withering cross fire. General Helm, their beloved leader, riding boldly toward the works of the enemy was hit in the right side by a musket ball and fell mortally stricken from his horse.

Immediately after Helm had received his fatal wound, Colonel Joseph H. Lewis of the Sixth Kentucky was ordered to command the brigade, but the fire of the Federals drove the Confederates back two hundred yards to the rear and this left a gap in Breckinridge's line, which caused much tactical trouble and a great loss of life during the remainder of the battle. The rest of the encounter is of course a matter of historical record, and even the dying General Helm at the close of the day heard that the battle of Chickamauga was a victory for the Confederates.

When General Helm fell on the morning of September 20th, 1863, he was carried from the field by his two aides, Lieutenant William Wallace Herr and Lieutenant John B. Pirtle. Upon an examination of the wound in his right side, it was soon determined by the military surgeons of the field hospital that there was no hope for his recovery. He lingered for several hours and during the night of that fatal day he expired. The corpse of the thirty-two-year-old brigadier-general was then conveyed to the home of Colonel W. H. Dabney in Atlanta, where the remains lay until the 23rd. A funeral service for the brave soldier was held in the Episcopal Church, followed by interment in the Atlanta Cemetery with military honors.

Immediately after the battle of Chickamauga, dispatches were received by Lincoln concerning the engagement and the unconfirmed report of the death of General Helm was a great shock to him. Senator David Davis called on Lincoln on the 22nd of September and he found Lincoln suffering intense grief. "Davis," he said, "I feel as David of old did when he was told of the death of Absalom." Senator Davis understood that Lincoln was grieving over the death of his brother-in-law and he immediately excused himself. On September 24, 1863, Lincoln sent a telegram to Major-General William S. Rosecrans at Chattanooga stating that he had read the southern account of the battle of Chickamauga in the Richmond papers in which, among other Confederate generals, Helm of Kentucky was listed as killed. Yet, at the same time, he explained to Rosecrans that a Brigadier-General John (B. H.) Helm was listed as among those wounded. In all likelihood Lincoln held out a faint hope for awhile that General Helm had been wounded and not killed, but such was not the case.

On the same day that he wired General Rosecrans, Lincoln sent a telegram to his wife, who was then residing at the Fifth Avenue Hotel while on a visit to New York City. In terse sentences he told her of the battle in which "we are worsted." Among the casualties, he informed her rather coldly, because in a telegram he could not well afford to show any sympathy for a rebel general, that "your brother-in-law, Helm," was among those killed in the engagement.

In some sections of the war-torn country, news traveled rather slowly and on October 11, 1863, Governor John L. Helm wrote Mrs. Robert S. Todd of Lexington that he had just received the news of the death of his son, who fell at Chickamauga. His letter was rather pathetic:

"Elizabethtown, Ky.
October 11, 1863

Dear Madam:

It is due to you that I announce the death of my son. He fell in the battle south of Chattanooga I have unquestionable information. He was buried in Atlanta. It is probable Emilie was there. Could you through friends or by your own relationship secure for Emilie a passport home. If she could be allowed to come to Nashville I would go after her, if a pass would be allowed me. I am totally at a loss to know how to begin. Could you or one of your daughters write to Mrs. Lincoln and through her secure a pass?

In deep sorrow
I am respectfully

John L. Helm."

Governor Helm was correct in his assumption that Emilie had attended her husband's funeral. Having accompanied her husband South, she was visiting her sister, Mrs. N. H. R. Dawson at Selma, Alabama, at the time of General Helm's death, and she had been notified by General Bragg to come to Atlanta for the funeral services. She arrived just in time to be present at the sad rites.

After the funeral, Mrs. Helm planned to return with her two children to her mother's home in Lexington and General Bragg had promised her that he would intercede for her and try to obtain a pass from General Grant, but that Union General was not sympathetic to the proposal. However at the suggestion of Governor Helm, Mrs. Todd, acting through the Lexington postmaster, Dr. L. Beecher Todd, a cousin of Mrs. Lincoln, asked for permission to go to Georgia and to bring her bereaved daughter and her two grandchildren home. Accordingly Lincoln obliged Mrs. Todd with the following pass which he sent by telegram in the care of the postmaster:

"War Department, October 15, 1863, L. B. Todd,
Lexington:

I send the following pass to your care.

A. Lincoln

"Washington, D. C. October 15, 1863

To Whom it May Concern: Allow Mrs. Robert S. Todd, widow, to go South and bring her daughter, Mrs. General B. Hardin Helm, with her children north to Kentucky.

A. Lincoln"

Knowing that Mrs. Helm would also need a pass as soon as she started her journey homeward, Lincoln about two months later wrote the following order:

"Executive Mansion, Washington, December 14, 1863
Whom it may concern: It is my wish that Mrs. Emily T. Helm (widow of the late General B. H. Helm, who fell in the Confederate service), now returning to Kentucky, may have protection of person and property, except as to slaves, of which I say nothing.

A. Lincoln."

Lincoln assumed, although one wonders why, that Mrs. Helm would take an oath of allegiance to the United States. He carefully prepared the following documents for her to subscribe:

"December 14, 1863—Amnesty to Mrs. E. T. Helm.
Executive Mansion, Washington, December 14, 1863
Mrs. Emily T. Helm, not being excepted from the benefits of the proclamation by the President of the United States issued on the eighth day of December, 1863, and having on this day taken and subscribed the oath according to said proclamation, she is fully relieved of all penalties and forfeitures, and remitted to all her rights — all according to said proclamation, and not otherwise; and, in regard to said restored rights of person and property, she is to be protected and afforded facilities as a loyal person.

Abraham Lincoln"

(Continued to the March, 1972 issue)

NONFICTION

CIVIL WAR

CHICKAMAUGA AND CHATTANOOGA

*The Battles That Doomed
the Confederacy.*

John Bowers.

HarperCollins, \$28.

NYT
6/26/94

The Confederate general Braxton Bragg had an uncommon ability to turn victory into defeat. Over the course of three days in September 1863 his forces soundly beat the Union Army of the Cumberland at the Battle of Chickamauga in Georgia. But General Bragg did not press his advantage, the Union commander was replaced by the far more aggressive Ulysses S. Grant, and in November Grant's forces inflicted a devastating defeat on Bragg's army at Chattanooga. John Bowers, a novelist who is also the author of "Stonewall Jackson: Portrait of a Soldier," has written a lively narrative focusing on the somewhat outlandish personalities of many of the commanders, on some of the grimmer or more remarkable aspects of the battles rather than on a detailed consideration of strategy, and on the profound effect Bragg's defeat and Grant's ascendancy had on the war.

RICHARD E. NICHOLLS

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CHICAMAUGA, CHATTANOOGA, LOOK/OUT MOUNTAIN .

In the autumn of '63 while the ~~amin~~ armies in Virginia, were inactive, the struggle centered near the point where Chicamauga Creek flows north into Tennessee. Here on Sept. 19 and 20, Bragg routed the Union forces who were saved from complete ruin by Thomas, "The Rock of Chicam^uarga." In one of the most spectacular battles of the war, inspired by the presence of Grant, the Union forces were decisively victorious in the great fight about Chattanooga. The picture shows the magnificent view from Lookout Mountain. By this time Lincoln had become a military leader and tacticians; throughout the closing years of the war, he was really Commander-in-Chief, though he constantly deferred to these whose judgment he thought better than his own.



Chattanooga from Lookout Mountain



